

STRATEGY  
RESEARCH  
PROJECT

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**LAM SON 719: PERILS OF STRATEGY**

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## USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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### LAM SON 719: PERILS OF STRATEGY

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## ABSTRACT

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United States policy and strategy shaped the operational and tactical approach to operations in the Republic of South Vietnam. This study traces the formulation of our involvement in Vietnam and how we attempted to prosecute that conflict. It links South Vietnam's unsuccessful assault into Laos with ill defined policy from our executive branch and flawed strategy by our senior military leaders. The paper argues that the United States shares the blame with South Vietnam for a failed campaign. Military, civilian, and the authors personal involvement in the campaign are used as sources.

## INTRODUCTION

If the strategy be wrong, the skill of the general on the battlefield,  
the valor of the soldier, the brilliancy of victory, however  
otherwise decisive, fail of their effect

Alfred Thayer Mahan  
Naval Administration and Warfare<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper will outline how the grand strategy in Vietnam directly and/or indirectly led to major operational and tactical mistakes during the invasion of Laos in 1971. There will not be an attempt to prophesied what other outcomes might have occurred had different strategies and alternative decisions been applied. The basic premise employed will be that at the time of involvement, the U.S. was the most powerful and influential nation in the world, and that our leadership was comprised of competent, well-advised statesman and military leaders.

Lam Son 719 was a significant campaign fought under atrocious conditions. It demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of South Vietnamese forces, represented a test of President Nixon's Vietnamization policy, was the last major military event of the Vietnam War before the U.S. evacuation, and increased the opposition in the U.S. against President Nixon's policies regarding the war. Finally, there exists a possible selfish reason for this research paper, not as academic as the beforementioned justifications but as important in a personal sense. As a junior captain I participated in this operation. Some twenty-five years later the knowledge I acquired reading dispatches, reports, and numerous books has given me a much different perspective of this operation

than I enjoyed as a pilot looking through a windshield. It has been a healthy catharsis for me.

## BACKGROUND

On the morning of 8 February 1971, the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN), combined with US air assets, launched a massive invasion of neutral Laos to sever what was commonly known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This invasion, LAM SON 719, named after the village of Lam Son (the birthplace of Le Loi, a Vietnamese hero), was designed to destroy enemy forces and stockpiles and sever enemy lines of communications in Base Areas 604 and 611, along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (See Fig 1).

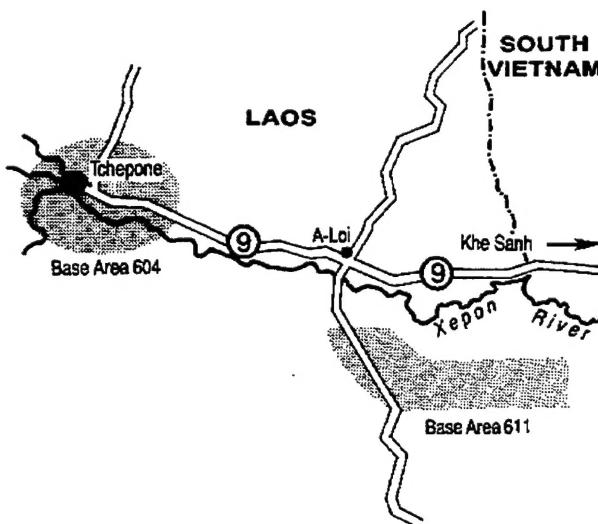


Figure 1. Base Area 604 and 611

The Base Area's were invaded, not to gain terrain but to take supply depots away from the North Vietnamese, interdict their northern infiltration routes, and inflict substantial losses on NVA units. The operation also had an additional political and military objective, to publicly demonstrate that the Vietnamese could carry the war by themselves (Vietnamization), thus affording the US an opportunity to execute an orderly withdrawal from Vietnam.

The Geneva Agreement of July 1962 was designed to settle the conflict in Laos. It prohibited the US and other foreign powers from implementing any plan to station military forces in Laos. Certain points in the Declaration of the Neutrality of Laos ,which the North Vietnamese repeatedly violated, would block US implementation of CINCPAC OPLAN 32-64 (defense of Laos), a plan that had been initially written in 1962 and was continually refined. The agreement included articles such as: no foreign troops or military personnel in Laos; no military bases in Laos; and a prohibition on using the territory of Laos to interfere in the internal affairs of another country.<sup>2</sup>

As early as 1964, General William Westmoreland, Commander of United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), had given serious consideration to establishing an international force below the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and across Laos, generally along Route 9. Contingency plans were prepared in 1967 for a corps-size force of three divisions to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Sufficient forces were not available for such an operation until 1968, by which time President Johnson was beset by war critics and was thus unable to expand the war.<sup>3</sup> Any offensive planning at this stage had major stumbling blocks imposed by the US Congress. There was not only rising antiwar hysteria following the Cambodia incursion in May 1970, but a recently passed Congressional amendment (Cooper-Church) prohibiting U.S. ground troops from entering Laos and Cambodia. This amendment finalized the way the Vietnam War was to be fought. We were limited to fighting the North Vietnamese within the confines of South Vietnam on a land maneuver basis. It was as if we had not learned anything from our past military experiences. The amendment also displayed the growing frustration of

the American public, and its Congress, who did not want to expand a war that had gone on too long and cost too many lives. American infantrymen could be employed as supporting forces along the border, and aviation units could actually attack targets in Laos, but only the ARVN could mount necessary search and destroy campaigns in Laos. Not even US advisors could accompany the ARVN on these missions. This was a major departure from standard operating procedure, for every South Vietnamese unit had Americans with them to help coordinate fire support and logistics from US sources, and to offer guidance on the waging of war.

## STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE: THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

There was no attempt by the North Vietnamese to deceive anyone on the decisiveness of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The trail stretched some 1,000 kilometers from north to south and was the strategic link that allowed the North Vietnamese to remain actively engaged in South Vietnam. In order to assist their forces in the South to fight the American invaders, messages, food, and men had to pass, at all cost, south along what was called by the North Vietnamese, the "Long Cordillera"<sup>4</sup> (See Fig 2).

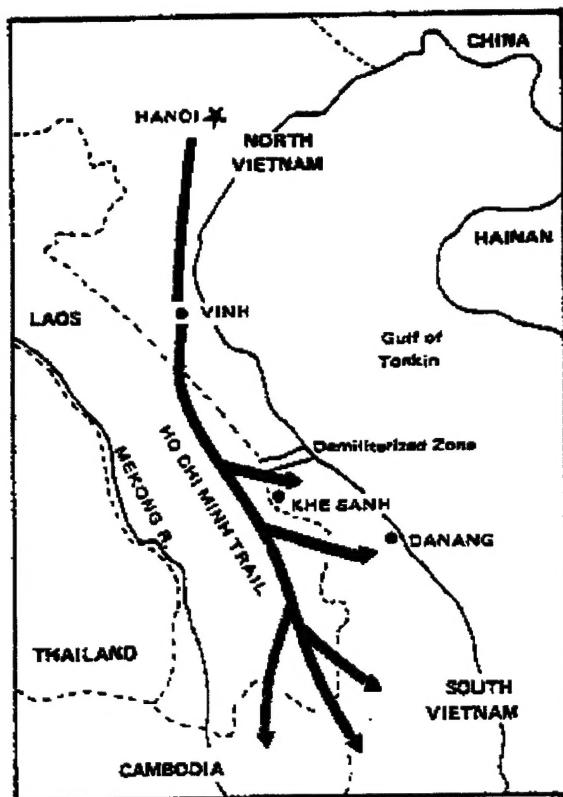


Figure 2. The Ho Chi Minh Trail

A special unit was formed in 1959 to turn the Long Cordillera into a north-south road network. With rucksacks on their backs, carrying weapons and food, they set off to establish communication with the South. These men had fought the French and had

taken the path of the Cordillera to get back to the north. They knew not only the terrain but the dwellers along the way. They started out as small units carrying only light weapons on men's backs, elephants' back, or on packed bicycles with relays set up along the way. In 1965, U.S. involvement increased significantly. Weapons and reinforcements had to be dispatched in abundance to assist the South Vietnamese sympathizers, commonly called Viet Cong. Building was begun in earnest on a road network that could support motorized convoys. Tens of thousands of "Vanguard Youths," composed mainly of young girls, with hoes and picks, built the trail.<sup>5</sup> Attacks by U.S. planes and unexploded bombs were among the hazards to the construction of this massive network. At night, these youths carried lanterns to lead vehicles around bomb craters, through fords, or blocks of stone. Due to the extensive bombing campaigns, a network of roads 10,000 kilometers in length was built to cover a 1,000 kilometers distance. In 1968, a pipeline was built to transport oil from Haiphong to the southern battlefield 2,000 kilometers away. In the forests along the trail were thousands of refugees, food depots, ammo dumps, infirmaries, and even theater groups to entertain the workers. All told there were over 100,000 people who worked diligently every day to keep this line of communication open to the south. The resolve of the North Vietnamese was that life on the trail was to be normalized as this war could likely last ten or twenty years.

Prior to 1971, the US solution to closing the trail was strategic and tactical bombing. The US dropped three million tons of bombs in Laos, mainly to disrupt and destroy the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The U.S. Air Force claimed that its bombs and improved

weapons systems inflicted heavy losses on the NVA in terms of personnel, vehicles, and material moving down the trail. In fact, in early 1971, the Air Force released the story that their interdiction effort was so effective that only one ton out of every thirty-two tons shipped from North Vietnam ever reached its final destination in South Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequent NVA offensive operations in South Vietnam demonstrated that the US Air Force claim was greatly exaggerated. As Alexander P. De Seversky stated in Victory Through Air Power, “Total war from the air against an undeveloped country or region is well-nigh futile”.<sup>7</sup> More than ever, the Ho Chi Minh Trail played its crucial role as a strategic artery. Overtime, the soldiers, tanks, and artillery which would ultimately take control of Saigon in April 1975 would make their way South over this formed road.

## THE SECRET WAR IN LAOS

There was never any question that the North Vietnamese could have overrun Laos any time they cared to, providing they were willing to put up with the political price of undermining the 1962 Accords. It would have lent credence to the US interest of containing Communist aggression throughout the region. In January 1970, the North Vietnamese stepped up military operations in northern Laos. The American Ambassador called for increased B-52 strikes to prevent the North Vietnamese from overrunning the northern region. It was the Nixon administration's feeling that if we undertook increased activity in Laos, the secret war we had been engaged in for almost tens years would be discovered and such disclosure would only fuel the antiwar controversy ongoing in the U.S.

In a memorandum to President Richard M. Nixon in early 1970, Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, the National Security Advisor, spelled out the context of a Laotian/Vietnamese linkage.

Should North Vietnam overrun Laos, our whole bargaining with respect to the Vietnam conflict would be undermined. In fact, if North Vietnamese military operations in Laos succeed to the point that Souvanna (ruler of Laos) believes he must succumb to their influence in order to survive, we could then anticipate that he would refuse to permit us to continue our interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and thus our military operations in South Vietnam would be catastrophically damaged.<sup>8</sup>

Our role in Laos had been kept "secret" in three administrations and each President wanted to keep it limited. Rather than introduce conventional military units in Laos, the Kennedy administration mounted a wide-ranging covert paramilitary campaign led by the CIA and its proprietary organization Air America.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, US Army Special Forces units had been operating in Laos since July 1959 under the code name WHITE

STAR.<sup>10</sup> Each administration realized the significance of maintaining a resistance organization in Laos to ensure that the North Vietnamese would not take control of the country.

## THE PRESIDENTIAL IMPACT

“If we are not in Korea to win, then this administration should be indicted for the murder of thousands of American boys.”<sup>11</sup>

Joseph Martin, Minority Leader House of Representatives

An understanding of the Executive Branch’s commitment to Vietnam must be understood in order to grasp why Lam Son 719 was initiated. Under the Eisenhower administration the U.S. sent advisors to South Vietnam as a means of assisting a country that wanted to be free of communist rule. However, Eisenhower strongly believed that the Vietnamese were not ready for the form of democracy that the U.S. enjoyed. Eisenhower quoted what a Frenchman had said to him in his book, Mandate for Change, “What Vietnam needs is another Syngman Rhee, regardless of all the difficulties the presence of such a personality would entail.”<sup>12</sup> Eisenhower’s assessment of Southeast Asia’s problems did not lie solely within Vietnam. During the transition briefings from Eisenhower to Kennedy he scarcely mentioned Vietnam while dwelling on his preoccupation with Laos. He seemed to be advising the President-elect that if all else failed in Laos, that country was important enough to warrant U.S. intervention even if we had to “go it alone.”<sup>13</sup>

President Kennedy had inherited a commitment to the Republic of South Vietnam but did not believe that it was a commitment of American ground troops. “In the final analysis, it is their war ....I don’t think the war can be won unless the people support the effort.”<sup>14</sup> The war in Vietnam, the President added, “could be won only so long as it was their war. If it were ever converted into a white man’s war, we would lose as the French

had lost a decade earlier.”<sup>15</sup> Kennedy was briefed thoroughly on the trails in Laos and how they were impacting events shaping up in South Vietnam. Military briefings indicated that in order to stop the growing aggression in South Vietnam the U.S. must intervene in Laos or attack North Vietnam. Kennedy stated, “No matter what goes wrong or whose fault it really is, the argument will be that the Communist have stepped up their infiltration and we can’t win unless we hit the north. Those trails are a built-in excuse for failure, and a built-in argument for escalation.”<sup>16</sup> Kennedy was still smarting from the Bay of Pigs disaster where he had intervened in the existing military plan at the last minute and in the aftermath of failure had received extensive criticism. After that affair, and after experiencing high estimates from the Joint Chiefs of Staff concerning the requirements for an intervention in Laos, he was not prepared to stake politically very much on what the Chiefs had recommended. The Chiefs had estimated that 60,000 men would be required to guarantee success in Laos until they were reminded about the Bay of Pigs disaster and then the estimate went to 140,000 with tactical nukes added. Advice such as this from Kennedy’s military leadership further solidified his distrust for military judgments. Toward the end of his life, President Kennedy felt that Vietnam was not politically winnable. Shortly before his death, President Kennedy approved a plan for the phased withdrawal of US military personnel from Vietnam. Forces were supposed to be reduced to about 12,000 by the middle of 1964, bottoming out by the middle of 1968 at the level of 1,500. The removal of the first 1,000 troops was to be completed before the end of 1963, and almost that number were in fact withdrawn in the month following Kennedy’s assassination on November of that year.<sup>17</sup>

"I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved-the Great Society-in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home... but if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser."

Lyndon B. Johnson <sup>18</sup>

President Johnson assumed the office of Commander in Chief in November 1963. In eighteen months he had turned what once was a limited commitment to assist the South Vietnamese in putting down an insurgency into an open-ended commitment to use American military power to maintain an independent South Vietnam. In November 1964, he authorized a sustained bombing campaign, ROLLING THUNDER, of North Vietnam and Laos.<sup>19</sup> The next six months were spent deciding how effective the air campaign would be and what type of additional support would be required to ultimately finalize this conflict. Johnson knew that a bombing campaign alone would not do the job. General Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs advocated a drastic expansion of the role of American ground forces and the adoption of an offensive strategy in the south. Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs had opposed the enclave strategy from the start and now insisted that it be abandoned in favor of an aggressive, offensive strategy. "You must take the fight to the enemy," General Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs affirmed. "No one ever won a battle sitting on his ass."<sup>20</sup> The U.S. Congress still had not been asked for a declaration of war or even a specific resolution of support; only to recognize the situation and support the President's actions. In July, 1965, Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, presented the President with three options: cut our losses and withdraw, continue fighting at the current level, or to substantially expand our military presence.

Johnson choose to expand our forces based on the recommendation from advisors George Bundy, Dean Rusk, and general's Westmoreland, Maxwell Taylor, and Wheeler. He did not discuss his decision with the National Security Council, the Congress, nor any other members of his Cabinet. He launched what would become America's longest, most frustrating, and most divisive war, with only a slim idea of what lay ahead. The American commitment to the Vietnam War was now open-ended, and the mission was to "convince" Hanoi to end its aggression.

The North Vietnamese had already involved all of Indochina. They had base camps, artillery positions, supply depots, major headquarters, and hospitals in every country bordering South Vietnam. Ex-president Eisenhower could not understand President Johnson's reluctance to hit the enemy bases. "Tell 'em they have no sanctuaries!" he counseled Johnson.<sup>21</sup> The prohibition of fighting beyond South Vietnam's borders in Laos and Cambodia was indefensible. South Vietnamese military leaders could not understand why we were not in the war to win. President Johnson inherited the Vietnam War, and found it totally foreign to his experience. He was a domestic leader who wanted to have his Great Society and win the war in Vietnam, not be the first president to lose a war.<sup>22</sup> During the latter stages of the Johnson Administration the president was content to seek compromise in the conflicts around him instead of making critical decisions that would resolve the Vietnam conflict and improve his domestic challenges. Eventually, Johnson was perfectly content to hand the complete package to the next administration, just as it had been handed to him.

By the time President Nixon took office in January 1969 we had over a half-million Americans engaged in Southeast Asia, thirty-one thousand had died, and both numbers were climbing. His administration was determined to end our involvement in Vietnam. They were just not sure how. Did we just walk away as de Gaulle had done, or should we develop appropriate strategy and assist South Vietnam in gaining a form of peaceful democracy; or was it an extended exit strategy that was most important? These were the possible options facing the new administration; no easy answers and no help domestically, as the American people wanted us out with honor, immediately. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's newly appointed Secretary of State, faced serious challenges in attempting to end the war while maintaining U.S. respect abroad. He traveled to Vietnam in 1965 and wrote in his diary:

I was impressed by the fact that no one could really explain to me how even on the most favorable assumptions about the war in Vietnam the war was going to end.... If we fail in our Pacific operations it will not be because of a failure in the technical realm, but because of a difficulty of synchronizing political and military objectives in a situation for which the enormously complex military establishment is not designed.<sup>23</sup>

Dr. Kissinger was to become Nixon's principal advisor on matters pertaining to U.S. strategy in Vietnam. He requested options from the new administration's team, to include military leaders. The only solution the military presented was to mount a bombing campaign north of the DMZ. A thorough study suggested an alternative to bombing the north, striking at the North's sanctuaries. It was determined that the port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia was used to support forces operating in South Vietnam's Military Regions 3 and 4. Over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos passed the preponderance

of the arms and ammunition being used to prosecute the war in Military Region 1 and 2.<sup>24</sup>

President Nixon's Vietnam focus was punctuated with secret bombings of known sanctuaries, secret peace talks with the North Vietnamese, and a new strategy of Vietnamization. President Nixon's strategy of Vietnamization, while at the same time bringing greater military pressure to bear on Hanoi and steadily withdrawing U.S. forces, rested on the ability of the South Vietnamese to carry the war on their own.

The South Vietnamese saw Vietnamization in a different light than their American counterparts. The U.S. perceived it as a new strategy which would allow for an orderly and incremental withdrawal of American forces, modernize and rapidly expand the role of the South Vietnamese, and to assist and strengthen the development of the South Vietnamese economy by increasing non-military aid. Saigon perceived it as a U.S. bargaining chip in the peace talks, to disengage itself from the war with honor, and leave South Vietnam to its own fate. They felt it unwittingly admitted the U.S. error in strategy and the failure of US military efforts, a historical repeat of the French debacle years earlier.<sup>25</sup>

## LAM SON 719

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish... the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

Clausewitz, On War<sup>26</sup>

By 1970, many of the programs designed to boost the fighting skills of the South Vietnamese forces and strengthen the nation's economy were well underway. This favorable setting received a major assist when Prince Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown as Chief of State in neighboring Cambodia. For many years, Cambodia, under Sihanouk's rule, had been a sanctuary for the North Vietnamese. They had built a network of bases from which they mounted attacks against South Vietnam. This turn of events set the stage for a joint incursion into Cambodia by South Vietnamese and U.S. forces. The operation was coordinated, and requested, by the new Cambodian government. This crossborder, offensive campaign was a resounding success.<sup>27</sup> The coup in Cambodia had an additional factor that would make the Ho Chi Minh Trail more prominent, it closed the port in Sihanoukville. Deprived for the time being of sanctuaries in Cambodia, the NVA begin to reinforce units operating from bases in Laos and dedicating enormous energy to improve and fortify the trail. The Ho Chi Minh Trail now became essential for the North Vietnamese to support the entire war effort in South Vietnam.

In early January 1971, General Creighton W. Abrams, COMUSMACV, called on General Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the Joint General Staff and Minister of Defense of South Vietnam, a long time proponent of severing the NVA lifeline.<sup>28</sup> He proposed an

operation into lower Laos designed to search and destroy Base Area's 604 and 611. General Vien agreed with the proposal and immediately ordered staff officers to work out an operational plan. This was discussed with the President of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, and he immediately approved the concept.<sup>29</sup> The question of who initiated the operation is of little importance other than the fact that the South Vietnamese denied responsibility by saying, "The Cambodian foray in 1970 and the Laos operation to Tchepone in 1971 came into being only because MACV originated them, promoted them, and supported them."<sup>30</sup>

The architect of the operation on the US side is unclear. Kissinger wanted another Cambodia operation in 1971 and General Abrams<sup>31</sup> desired a small Cambodian operation and a simultaneous push into Laos to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail. President Nixon convened a meeting of his cabinet on 18 January 1971 to discuss options for a major offensive thrust. All knew that if some actions were not taken to interrupt the North Vietnamese buildup, the situation of South Vietnam in the next year would become precarious.<sup>32</sup> The flaw in this late determination of actions was that it gave no time to explore any weaknesses of the plan or to consider alternate means of accomplishing the objectives.

Based on a directive from COMUSMACV, planning by staff officers from Lieutenant General (LTG) Hoang Xuan Lam's I Corps (ARVN) staff and Lieutenant General (LTG) James W. Sutherland's XXIV Corps (US) staff met on 7 January. By 15 January the two staffs had worked out the details of Lam Son 719.<sup>33</sup> LTG Lam was selected as the ARVN force commander and LTG Sutherland was to be the US force

commander responsible for supporting the ARVN operation by helicopter, air strikes, and artillery fire from South Vietnam. Lam Son 719 was planned to be a four phase operation. Phase I was to begin on 30 January with US forces clearing and securing the area to the Laotian border and activating the base at Khe Sanh. Khe Sanh was to be the principal logistical base for Lam Son 719. In Phase II, ARVN forces would launch a three-pronged assault from South Vietnam astride Highway 9 to the town of Tchepone. The center column, consisting of the ARVN Airborne Division, reinforced by the 1st Armored Brigade, would attack west on Highway 9 by helicopter combat assaults and ground movement to A Luoi (See Fig. 3), then forward to Tchepone. The South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division would advance on a parallel axis to the south of Highway 9, protecting the southern flank of I Corps. The 1st Ranger Group, with its three battalions, was to be air assaulted north of Highway 9 to protect the northern flank of I Corps. Two Marine Brigades would serve as I Corps reserve. Phase III was to be initiated after the successful occupation of Tchepone. It was to exploit the successes of Phase II with destruction of NVA bases and stockpiles. The Airborne Division would search the area of Tchepone while the 1st Infantry Division would conduct search operations to the south in the 611 Base Area. The 1st Ranger Group would continue holding blocking positions to the north.<sup>34</sup> Phase IV was the withdrawal phase.

Phase IV was perceived to be the most complex mission of the operation. Essentially, all ARVN elements would withdraw along Highway 9 while covering each other to the maximum extent possible. The mission of U.S. forces during Phases II-IV

was to remain unchanged; they would continue to provide fire support, helicopter support, and strategic and tactical air for ARVN units.

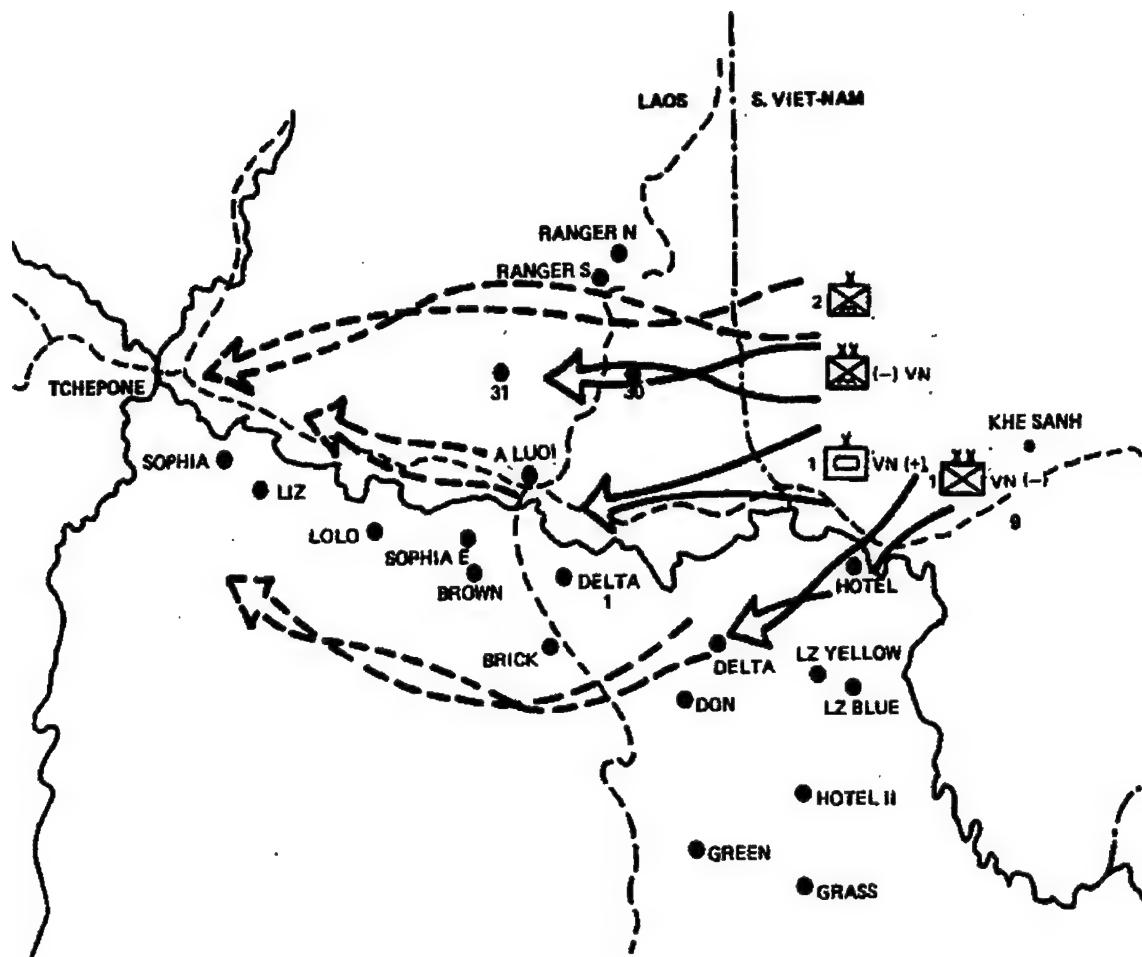


Figure 3. Operation Plan Phase II

On 22 January 1971, XXIV (US) and I Corps (ARVN) completed revisions to the plan and produced their final orders. On 29 January, XXIV Corps was to establish a forward Command Post (CP) at Quang Tri combat base. On 30 January, I Corps was to establish a forward CP at Dong Ha, five miles north of Quang Tri. I Corps would place a forward planning element at Ham Nghi, located one mile from Khe Sanh. Additionally,

MACV in concert with CINCPAC, planned a diversion operation off the eastern coast of North Vietnam involving U.S. Naval and Marine units.

The most vital consideration in logistic support planning was supply routes and modes of transportation. The only ground axes available were Highways 1 and 9. These ranged from a two-way all weather road to a single lane improved dirt road that was marked by destroyed bridges. The air resupply routes were generally along the road network, except for bases that were far off the road network. Helicopters would be used extensively for resupply of forward areas.

Extensive planning and operational preparations had taken place. However, the entire process appeared to have taken place in a great rush. Considering the scale of the operation and importance of the objectives, the time involved for planning was too short. A most difficult campaign was to be conducted over unfamiliar terrain, against an enemy that had received warning of an impending operation. The NVA had but a single avenue to carry their war to the south, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and they were going to defend it at all costs.

The terrain favored the NVA because they had been living and working this area of Laos for over ten years. Why would the operational planners require the ARVN to execute a major offensive effort along a single axis of advance? The ARVN mechanized and armor forces were to be hemmed in by steep valleys, rough mountains, and dense jungles. In order for this type of operation to succeed the attacker must have overwhelming forces to guard his flanks. This was not the case.

A comparison of friendly and enemy forces in lower Laos also resulted in some contention in the initial phase. Over eleven regimental-size infantry or equivalent elements were known to have operated in the area of operations. Within a period from one to two weeks, the NVA were capable of reinforcing with up to a total of eight additional infantry regiments, with supporting artillery and logistical units. To defeat these NVA units, I Corps committed only eight infantry regiments or brigades. If I Corps committed their reserve it would still only have been ten regimental size units and the balance would be in favor of the NVA. In order to provide balance to this tactical advantage it appears the planners intended to rely on its air support forces. But helicopter and fixed wing aviation units were not an acceptable balance of forces in this environment. It appears in retrospect that U.S. operational and intelligence planners had overestimated the coalition and underestimated the enemy. Yet as the day of execution approached all participants were confident that they would succeed.

Crossborder operations commenced on 8 February 1971 and for the first few days every aspect of the plan went better than initially expected. Although the two controlling headquarters were separated by ten miles, the execution of this complex operation seemed to be well coordinated and achieving desired results. On 11 February, the operation took a turn for the worse. Increased NVA contact caused ARVN forces to stall. General Abrams chided at Sutherland (who was powerless to get anything accomplished across the border), he went to see General Vien, and both went to talk to Sutherland and Lam. The meeting produced a change of mission for the 1st Infantry Division. They were to occupy the terrain south of the Xepon River and support the Airborne Division's push

toward Tchepone. The ARVN force continued moving very slowly against heavy enemy pressure. The Ranger Group was experiencing extreme pressure on the northern flank. LTG Lam concluded that the position held by the 21st Rangers and the survivors of the 39th was untenable.<sup>35</sup>

The situation by this time was becoming increasingly tense throughout the area of operations. The ARVN westward drive was completely stalled. In the midst of this situation, I Corps Headquarters received a directive from President Thieu to have the Marine Division relieve the Airborne Division<sup>36</sup>. This made absolutely no sense to anyone. LTG Lam flew to Saigon to offer alternatives to the President. He convinced Thieu to alter the mission of the 1st Infantry Division again and allow the Airborne Division to protect the northern flank and secure Highway 9. The Airborne Division had been Thieu's private guard force and it was felt he did not want to lose them.

By the first week of March, the objective of Tchepone had been effected, but not without heavier casualties and more resistance than US or ARVN intelligence predicted. The movement into Tchepone ended the offensive phase of the operation. On 9 March, General Lam flew to Saigon to present to Thieu his reasons for withdrawing from Laos. The withdrawal would be an agonizing affair. The NVA units concentrated heavy antiaircraft fire on the helicopters, attacked the fire bases, and ambushed retreating ARVN soldiers. By 25 March, the ARVN soldiers had returned to Vietnam.

Both South and North Vietnam claimed victory, the South because they had reached Tchepone, their final objective, and the North because they had rejected the South Vietnamese with ease from Laos. The statistics were also ambiguous. XXIV

Corps After Action Report<sup>37</sup> showed 19,360 NVA killed in action. These figures were most likely inflated for killed in action NVA soldiers. However, it is valid to say that the NVA lost over 20,000 soldiers, either killed or seriously wounded. This would account to about half of their maneuver forces. The U.S. and ARVN casualties were listed as 9,065 killed and wounded. The print media that covered the campaign challenged the low ARVN figure and estimated it was over 9,000 without adding in the US numbers. Equipment losses were extremely heavy on both sides. Much speculation had arisen about the merits of the operation measured against the losses and casualties that I Corps had suffered.

U.S. support to the operation was not entirely satisfactory. Part of the problem seemed to derive from the physical separation of major operational headquarters. There was no official representation at Khe Sanh from XXIV Corps. Direction of support effort suffered from delays. Coordination of support activities was too loose for a fast changing tactical situation which required timely decisions on the spot.

President Thieu had a personal influence on the operation. It was he who approved the idea of launching an offensive into lower Laos, concurred with the general concept of operation and decided to augment the forces for I Corps. On at least two occasions, the directives he gave to the I Corps commander clearly affected the course of the operation itself. While the 21st and 39th Ranger Battalions were being heavily engaged, President Thieu made remarks to the effect that ARVN forces should take their time and should conduct search operations in the vicinities of their present positions while waiting for developments. From that day on, the Airborne Division would not

make any further advance. The second time involved the decision to push into Tchepone. President Thieu again met with LTG Lam and restructured I Corps forces in order to proceed into Tchepone.<sup>38</sup>

It was clear that Thieu listened to his field commanders. What he did not do was intervene when the Marine Division Commander, LTG Le Nguyen Khang, took independent action on occasions when the odds were against them. Khang was senior to Lam, and because of this, he placed his deputy in charge of the division and never went to one briefing on the operation. President Thieu and General Vien were aware of the discord among their subordinates, but they took no remedial action. General Lam may not have asked for such an action. The dissension among commanders adversely affected staff coordination between I Corps and the Airborne and Marine Divisions.<sup>39</sup>

The ARVN forces that fought in Lam Son 719 were often portrayed in the media as less than professional. There were shortcomings among the units but most fought with gallantry and dedication. The 1st Infantry Division's performance earned them the recognition as an elite, professional combat unit. The Airborne Division did not perform as brilliantly as its reputation would indicate. They fought extremely well as individual elements but lacked the cohesiveness to fight as a division. This can be attributed in part to the lack of contingency planning for an operation of this magnitude. The Marine Division had never fought as a division before and this was evident in selected engagements. The autonomy of the division commander hurt the conduct of their operations. The 1st Ranger Group was heavily engaged as soon as it was deployed. Its battalions responded extremely well under what was probably the most intense enemy

contact. The Armor units fought well but were handicapped by poor operational decisions on how they should have been deployed. Artillery units were flexible and fought admirably. Limitations of the fire base concept, and the fact that they left so many artillery pieces behind in Laos damaged their image.

The rapid and determined reaction of the NVA to the operation was the source of major problems. The ARVN enjoyed modern and effective air support, but were unable to neutralize the NVA antiaircraft systems. The NVA artillery did not receive any counter-battery fire. In a concerted effort, his antiaircraft weapons, artillery and mortars joined fires to neutralize the ARVN superiority in air mobility. The planners did not anticipate that the NVA's armor would be a major threat, especially in the Laotian jungle, thus the ARVN were unable to counter it effectively. Most combat decisions were based on subjective reasoning with the end result that neither our strategy nor our tactics seemed responsive enough to the kind of warfare the NVA was waging. Sun Tzu said, "Know thy enemy, know thyself, a hundred battles fought, a hundred victories assured."<sup>40</sup> ARVN military commanders did not grasp this simple truth and apply it. They were fighting the tactics that had been fought in the fields of South Vietnam for almost ten years. As a result of all of this, U.S. firepower and mobility were neutralized in Laos.

To determine objectively whether Lam Son 719 was a success or failure, one has only to weigh the results against the original mission. The mission was to destroy NVA forces and resources in Base Areas 604 and 611. Lam Son did not accomplish this mission. The ARVN soldiers spent most of the time in either static or in retrograde operations. Base Area 604 bore the brunt of the ARVN firepower but was not totally

neutralized. Base Area 611 was scarcely touched. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was back operational again within a week of the ARVN withdrawal.<sup>41</sup> The South Vietnamese were shocked by the heavy causalities, and the fact that they had to leave substantial numbers of dead and wounded in Laos. The South Vietnamese soldier knew he had been beaten.

## CONCLUSION

The South Vietnamese soldier was superior to his enemy as an individual. He was more experienced, better trained and better equipped. He fought with determination and professionalism against a numerically superior enemy who endeavored to protect his vital lifeline. Contrary to selected media coverage, statesman, and senior military members, the ARVN soldiers who fought in Lam Son 719 were heroic and believed in their cause. They engaged in battles that had not been previously fought with the same intensity and sheer numbers throughout the Vietnam War. It was the U.S. failure to adequately match policy selected with strategy chosen that lead to the failure of Lam Son 719 and ultimately the Vietnam War.

The far-reaching impact of this operation only materialized a long time afterwards as the situation in both South Vietnam and Cambodia began to improve. But the repercussions of this imperfect exploit seemed to indicate that the long term struggle of South Vietnam needed to be forged by sharper tactical skills and guided by greater effective strategic leadership.

The U.S. policies and strategies undertaken in South Vietnam played a significant role in the development and execution of Lam Son 719. Phillip Davidson states that Lam Son 719 demonstrated all too clearly that the ARVN forces were totally inadequate, not only in quantity, but in quality as well. And that Lam Son 719 disclosed a glaring lack of professionalism by the ARVN units.<sup>42</sup> The ARVN, modeled after U.S. forces, attempted to pattern their operations according to the doctrine that was used in South Vietnam. The U.S. designed and approved the command and control structure that became a liability for

the prosecution of the operation. The unity of effort was there to accomplish the desired results but the unity of command prevented a successful conclusion. The US added to the confusion by having our own interservice disputes. XXIV Corps and Seventh Air Force disagreed over the concept of air support for the operation. Seventh Air Force maintained that the air assault and air support operation should be under a single commander, CG, Seventh Air Force.<sup>43</sup> XXIV Corps and I Corps felt that bringing in another layer of command would only complicate a complex operation.

The US/ARVN planners neglected obvious flaws in the formulation of the plan. Attacking a well defended piece of terrain, along a single axis of advance, by an understrength force runs counter to everything that has been taught or conducted with any degree of success since the beginning of warfare. The U.S. planners should have recognized the glaring deficiencies which were certain to hamper the operation. The operational architects envisioned that the ARVN force, without significant relief or reinforcement, would reach Tchepone in three days and would stay in the objective area at least ninety days.<sup>44</sup> The concept of the operation and the expectations for its outcome far exceeded what any truly competent professional Army could have reasonably expected to accomplish.

By 1971, General Creighton Abrams had been in Vietnam almost four years. He knew more about the Indochina War than any man in uniform. Abrams knew Thieu, the South Vietnamese Army and its limitations, and the limitations of its leadership. There is a tremendous amount of speculation as to why he not only approved this operation, but why he pushed it on the South Vietnamese and our US policy makers. General Abrams

knew how critical southern Laos was to North Vietnam but had been briefed by US intelligence that the operation would be lightly opposed.<sup>45</sup> General Abrams needed time to upgrade the Vietnamization program and to keep North Vietnam from mounting any major offensives while U.S. combat troops continued their withdrawal. In order to buy time for what was needed a quick strike at an area that was crucial to North Vietnamese offensive preparations would serve the purpose.

Lam Son 719 did buy some time for an orderly withdrawal of US combat soldiers. As a result of the operation, the US increased its modernization effort for the ARVN forces with armor, artillery, and air equipment. It put the North Vietnamese on the defensive and gave valuable time for the Vietnamization program to work. Overtime had the U.S. continued robust support of ARVN forces a balance may have been achieved that would have led to a stalemate and an armistice similar to that achieved in Korea. Unfortunately, U.S. resolve slowly evaporated and Nixon was driven from office by the Watergate affair. In 1974 Congress voted to end aid to South Vietnam signaling the beginning of the end.

In 1975, North Vietnam overran the South in a series of large-scale military operations. U.S. aid, the life's blood of Vietnamization, had been cutoff and the South's forces quickly succumbed.

<sup>1</sup> Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, "Naval Administration and Warfare," in Then Vietnam War in Perspective, Colonel John M. Colleens, Strategic Research Group, National War College, 10 May 1972.

<sup>2</sup> James H. Harness, "Seven Points for Laos" Research Paper, 22 June 1968. His research concluded that this double standard on the "troops in Laos" issue put US forces at a major disadvantage throughout the war.

<sup>3</sup> General William C. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 147-148.

<sup>4</sup> The Ho Chi Minh Trail (Foreign Language Publishing House, Hanoi, 1985), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>6</sup> "Untold Story of the Ho Chi Minh Trail", US News and World Report, February 15, 1971, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander P. De Seversky, Victory Through Air Power (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1942), 102.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 454.

<sup>9</sup> Comments by Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson, Former Deputy Ambassador to Republic of South Vietnam, 1964-1965, during a interview by BDM Corporation, 13 February 1979. This commitment continued through the Johnson and Nixon administrations, and led to a complicated series of command arrangements and restrictions on US operations which would continue throughout the period of US involvement.

<sup>10</sup> The Vietnam Experience, Pawns of War: Cambodia and Laos (Boston Publishing Company, Boston MA, 1987), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Benard Bode, War & Politics (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1973), 82-83. Representative Joseph W. Martin, Minority Leader of the House of Representatives. Martins judgment on the morality of the administrations policy on Korea.

<sup>12</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, Mandate for Change: Vol I: The White House Years (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 360.

<sup>13</sup> Clark Clifford, later Secretary of Defense, was present at the briefing of December 1960, and it is his impressions of that event that is cited by Townsend Hoopes, The Limits of Intervention (New York: McKay, 1969), 167.

<sup>14</sup> New York Times, September 3, 1963, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., A Thousand Days (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 505.

<sup>16</sup> War & Politics, 135.

<sup>17</sup> The Pentagon Papers, Gravel ed., Vol 2, 160-200.

<sup>18</sup> Doris Kearns, Lyndon Johnson & the American Dream (New American Library, Times Mirror, 1976), 263.

<sup>19</sup> The Pentagon Papers Gravel ed., Vol. III. 547.

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Graff, The Tuesday Cabinet (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), 138.

<sup>21</sup> Dave Richard Palmer, Summons of the Trumpet US-Vietnam in Perspective (Presidio Press, 1978), 110.

<sup>22</sup> Actually, James Madison may have had that distinction in the War of 1812.

<sup>23</sup> Kissinger, White House Years, 232-233.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>25</sup> General Cao Van Vien and Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, Reflections on the Vietnam War, Indochina Monographs (Washington, D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 91-92.

<sup>26</sup> Clausewitz, On War, I:1, 88-89.

<sup>27</sup> Vien and Khuyen, Reflections on the Vietnam War, 97.

<sup>28</sup> "Vietnam: What Next? The Strategy of Isolation," Military Review, April 1972, 42.

<sup>29</sup> Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, Lam Son 719, Indochina Monographs (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Army Center for Military History, 1979), 33.

<sup>30</sup> Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, Strategy and Tactics, Indochina Monographs (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 73.

<sup>31</sup> LTG Davidson, states in his book, Vietnam at War, on p.657-659, that Abrams never gave his reasons why he advocated the operations, and lists several reasons why he might have supported Lamson 719. None of them are stated in any reports or documents I have read. Abram's final reason for advocating Lam Son 719 is a quote from Clausewitz, "Therefore, even when the likelihood of success is against us, we must not think of our undertaking as unreasonable or impossible; for it is always reasonable if we do not know of anything better to do, and if we make the best use of the few means at our disposal." Michael Howard and Peter Paret eds., Clausewitz: On War (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976.), 12-13. Do not believe the Vietnamese would have seen it quite this way.

<sup>32</sup> Kissinger, White House Years, 995-997.

<sup>33</sup> XXIV Corps After Action Report (Lam Son 719), 30 Jan-6 Apr 71, Military History Institute (MHI), Carlisle Barracks, PA., 54.

<sup>34</sup> Hinh, Lam Son 719, 43. General Lam considered the Ranger Group adequate for this mission, which was to provide the main body early warning of any enemy force approaching his flank to delay and force him to concentrate until heavier combat power could be placed against him. It would have been advantageous to assign this mission to a mobile, armor-equipped force, but not only did the rugged terrain preclude this, General Lam needed his armor and his 1st Division for the main effort. Furthermore, he wanted to keep the 1st Division available for a sweep south through base area 611.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 89. It was also reported, Phillip B. Davidson, Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975 (Presidio Press, Novato, CA)1988, that on 12 February, President Thieu told Lam and his division commanders to be cautious in moving west and to cancel the operation on e the ARVN force had taken 3,000 causalities.

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<sup>37</sup> US XXIV Corps, After Action Report, (MHI), 90.

<sup>38</sup> Hinh, Lam Son 719, 149-150.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>41</sup> Davidson, Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975, 651.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 653.

<sup>43</sup> General William W. Momoyer, USAF Air Power in Three Wars (WWII, Korea, Vietnam) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 321-324.

<sup>44</sup> Message, MACV to CJCS and CINCPAC, DTG 14 1435Z February 1971, (Military History Institute (MHI), Carlisle Barracks, PA.).

<sup>45</sup> U.S. XXIV Corps, After Action Report, (MHI), 2.